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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss several studies all of which demonstrate that duration of self-disclosure is a reliable component of the interpersonal process. They review other aspects of self-disclosure including that: (1) the act of revealing is not rewarding per se but can lead to rewards depending on the interpersonal nature of the situation; (2) socially isolated or closed situations encourage accelerated self-disclosure, especially in intimate areas of exchange; and (3) verbal exchange is a key process in interpersonal development. According to the authors, the non-verbal response of "amount of time talked" proves to be the most fruitful aspect of self-disclosure because it offers a additional advantages to studying the interpersonal process. Time spent talking can be easily measured with a pocket stop-watch. Subjects are not aware that the length of their disclosures is being taped; hence, it is impossible for them deliberately to distort their responses. The authors attest to the measure's sensitivity and usefulness as witnessed by the stability of findings across studies. (Author/PC)

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Beyond Words: Other Aspects of Self-Disclosure[1]

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Social penetration theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) has generated a number of empirical studies designed to investigate personality, reward/cost factors and situations in developing interpersonal relationships. The unique contribution of this theory is its portrayal of developing social interactions as proceeding gradually and systematically from superficial to intimate levels of discourse. That is, individuals generally let others know them gradually, first disclosing less intimate information and later making more personal aspects of themselves known to others.

Taylor and Oberlander (1969) found that individuals characterized as high disclosers were more sensitive to people and made finer distinctions among social stimuli in their interpersonal world. More specifically, we discovered that individuals who are more open interpersonally are also more skilled in sensing, processing and organizing information about others. Additional evidence regarding predisposition to disclose indicates that individuals who depart from their baselines for disclosure by "overdisclosing" or "underdisclosing" experience serious interpersonal difficulties (Taylor, Altman and Wheeler, 1973).

In discussing the rewarding aspects of self-disclosure, we have argued that revealing is not rewarding per se but can lead to rewards depending on the interpersonal nature of the situation. That is, the rewarding value of disciosure is dyadic--satisfaction derives from the joint contribution of characteristics of the revealer and characteristics

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of the recipient. When disclosure leads to reward or non-reward it is because of the reaction of the recipient to the disclosure, not from the disclosure itself. This is not to say that we cannot anticipate which disclosures will be rewarding and which will be non-rewarding, only that the final judgment must await the mediating experiences of the recipient. Indeed, we have successfully demonstrated that mixed patterns of rewards and costs can have surprising outcomes (Taylor, Altman and Sorrentino, 1969). Nonetheless, in all of our research we have used definitions of rewards and costs consistent with those of Homans (1956) and Thibault and Kelley (1959): "...positive and negative experiences in a social relationship" (Altman and Taylor, 1973, p. 32). In all of our studies the data indicate that openness to others, especially in intimate areas, is affected by reward/cost factors. While individuals are readily willing to disclose superficial aspects of themselves, there is great reluctance and a good deal of discrimination regarding self-disclosure in core intimate areas.

Finally, social penetration theory delineates the impact of situational factors on developing interpersonal relations. Situational factors include the physical environment, the social setting, and role relationships. In addition to physical proximity and arrangement of the environment, closed versus open environments have produced differences in degree of interpersonal openness. Our studies have generally shown that socially isolated or closed situations encourage accelerated self-disclosure, especially in intimate areas of exchange (Altman and Haythorn, 1965; Taylor, Altman and Sorrentino, 1969; Taylor, Altman and Wheeler, 1973).

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Breadth and Depth Dimensions of Social Penetration

In all of the studies cited above the basic dependent variable has been verbal self-disclosure. However, in attempting to portray a two-dimensional aspect of interpersonal development, we have categorized disclosures into a breadth and depth conceptualization. This analysis of breadth and depth dimensions in social discourse follows closely Lewin's central-peripheral concept of personality in which key influential properties are thought to be peripheral. In order to operationalize these distinctions we scaled a pool of items for intimacy of content using the Thurstone procedure of equal-appearing intervals (Thurstone and Chave, 1929). All items were also sorted into topical categories.

Operationally, breadth can be defined in terms of the number of items or topical categories an individual discloses about himself. Measures of depth of disclosure can be derived from the Thurstone scale values of items disclosed in interpersonal interaction as an index of depth.

In a series of studies we have examined regulatory mechanisms that mediate the impact of reward/cost patterns on self-disclosing behaviors. These studies have consistently shown that verbal exchange is a key process in interpersonal development. However, a serendipitous finding in these studies has been the effects derived from nonverbal aspects of self-disclosure. It is these nonverbal aspects of self-disclosure upon which we will concentrate in this paper.

Reward/Cost Expectancies

The typical paradigm employed which generated the data to be presented below involved the manipulation of four interpersonal reward/

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cost patterns:

(1) Continuous Positive--continuously positive reinforcement (reward) throughout the experiment

(2) Later Positive--initially negative reinforcement (cost) which later became positive (reward)

(3) Continuous Negative--continuously negative reinforcement (cost) throughout the experiment

(4) Later Negative--initially positive reinforcement (reward) which later became negative (cost)

In all cases these reward/cost patterns were established through confederate's responses to subjects during four trials of interaction. The proportion of positive to negative trials and the length of trials varied from experiment to experiment. In some cases the mixed patterns were equal--two trials negative and two trials positive; in others there was a three to one ratio between positive and negative reinforcement trials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As indicated above, the major dependent variable in all of these experiments was verbal self-disclosure. However, we looked at several facets of this response--breadth, depth and amount of time talked. Average amount of time talked proved to be the most fruitful aspect of self-disclosure. As can be seen in Figure 1, subjects receiving con-

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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tinuously positive reinforcement showed early increases in the average amount of time spent talking. This trend remained significantly higher

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over the four trials than was the case for subjects receiving the other patterns of reinforcement. Subjects in the Later Positive groups, who had their initially negative experiences disconfirmed, also showed a marginally significant rise in amount of time spent talking about themselves. However, this trend did not reach the level of disclosure time achieved by the former group. Subjects exposed to the Continuous Negative and Later Negative reinforcement patterns showed no increase in the average amount of disclosure time, and did not differ significantly from each other.

These data are from a 1969 study in which we predicted a contrast effect. That is, a second behavioral event will have its greatest impact when it is inconsistent with earlier behavior. This phenomenon has been reported by Berkowitz (1960a, 1960b); a second act which was relatively aggressive had its greatest impact when it has been preceded by a friendlier behavior. And as Siegman discussed earlier in this symposium, Aronson and Linder (1965) have referred to this same outcome as the "gain-loss" effect.

Examination of the data in Figure 1 indicates that we did not find the predicted contrast effect. However, in a subsequent replication of this study, using stronger manipulations, the contrast hypothesis was confirmed (see Figure 2). Note however, that this effect obtains

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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only for subjects in long-term Non-Withdrawal circumstances. In the short-term Withdrawal condition, a traditional reinforcement theory outcome is observed for the positive groups (Continuous Positive and Later

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Positive). Subjects exposed to the Continuous Positive pattern of reinforcement spent more time disclosing themselves than did subjects who were exposed to mixed reinforcement (initially negative then positive). The difference between the Continuous Negative and the Later Negative condition is in the expected direction, however, the extreme greater amount of talking by the Continuous Negative groups makes any interpretation of this effect difficult. When withdrawal is easy, perhaps talking for a longer period of time to an individual who is being negative represents the possibility of making that individual become more positive toward you. These outcomes were identical at each of three levels of intimacy.

In the Non-Withdrawal condition, the opposite effects were found, thus refuting reinforcement theory and supporting the cognitive interpretation of a contrast effect. Duration of disclosure time was enhanced (increased) when initially negative reinforcement became positive. On the other hand, when reinforcement switched from positive to negative, subjects showed a marked depression in the amount of time they spent in disclosing themselves. Again, this effect was consistent at each of the three levels of intimacy.

In another study (not yet published), we had an opportunity to compare the amount of self-disclosure at each of three levels of intimacy with disclosure duration. The importance of this comparison is that it demonstrates how two aspects of the same response (verbal self-disclosure) produce different outcomes. In attempting to examine an hypothesis advanced by Cozby (1972) which suggests that high volumes of self-disclosure may arouse anxiety in others by being too intimate

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and thereby becoming costly, we performed a repeated measures analysis on number of disclosure statements and duration of disclosure at each of three levels of intimacy. The complication of Cozby's hypothesis is that too much disclosure can be as dangerous or costly as too little disclosure. If this is true, there should be a curvilinear relationship between openness and level of intimacy. This was true for the amount of time spent talking but was not the case for the number of disclosures made. Subjects disclosed more low intimate items ($\bar{X}$ = 4.5) than high intimacy items ($\bar{X}$ = 2.6); the amount of disclosure at medium levels of intimacy was 4.1. Amount of time spent disclosing also varied with intimacy level. However, more time was spent disclosing medium intimacy information (136 seconds) than was the case for low intimacy information (109 seconds) or high intimacy statements (120 seconds).

These studies have consistently demonstrated that duration of self-disclosure is a reliable aspect of the interpersonal process. While it is fairly easy to assess interpersonal openness by having experimental subjects engage in overt self-disclosing behaviors, the unobtrusive measure of disclosure duration offers additional advantages. Time spent talking can be easily measured with a simple pocket stopwatch. Subjects are not aware that the length of their disclosures is being tapped; hence it is impossible for them to distort deliberately their responses either to please or disrupt the experimenter's purposes. The stability of findings across studies using this measure attests to its sensitivity and its usefulness. Future research will undoubtedly demonstrate this measure to be as useful and effective in assessing interpersonal behaviors as is spacial distance.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Paper presented at the symposium Conversation as unobtrusive behavior. at the 83rd annual convention of American Psychological Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, August, 1974.

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Figure 2. Mean Amount of Time Spent Talking for the Four Reinforcement Conditions at Each of Three Levels of Intimacy